

# Social Insecurity

The president, whose approval ratings are down on almost every issue, has yet to sell the country on his plan for Social Security



Khue Bui for Newsweek

Making his case: Bush hugs Elsy Valeriano at an stop in a Florida senior center

**WEB EXCLUSIVE**

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March 19 - Although President George W. Bush has been traveling the country touting a new plan to overhaul the Social Security system, campaigning in 15 states over six weeks, the majority of Americans remain unswayed, according to the latest NEWSWEEK poll. Only one-third of all Americans (33 percent) approve of his proposal to create investment accounts under Social Security, the poll found, while 59 percent disapprove. More Americans (44 percent) trust Congressional Democrats with managing the 70-year-old program. The poll also found that, with the exception of his handling of terrorism and homeland security, his approval numbers are down across the board.

Support for the Social Security plan breaks down reliably along party lines, with 72 percent of registered Republicans saying they support the Bush plan; marginally more Democrats (76 percent) side with Congressional Dems on the issue. Political Independents also give

Congressional Democrats the edge (40 percent, versus 28 percent for Bush).

The week he won re-election in November, President Bush declared: "I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it." And spend it is what he appears to have done: the president's overall approval rating has slipped below the 50 percent mark, his lowest score since being sworn in again in January. Forty-five percent of all Americans approve of the way he is doing his job, a five-point dip from early February; 48 percent disapprove, up six points. Bush's approval numbers have fallen the most among the demographic at whom his Social Security overhaul is targeted: just 43 percent of 18-29 year olds approve of his performance (down from 56 percent a month ago).

Social Security aside, the president's numbers are down on just about every issue except for his handling of terrorism and homeland security. His approval ratings are negative on the federal budget deficit (29 percent approve, 60 percent disapprove), health care (34 percent to 56 percent), the economy (42 percent to 51 percent) and the situation in Iraq (41 percent versus 54 percent). And on the heels of a Senate vote to pave the way for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the president's rating on the environment is also at a low point (41 percent approve, 45 percent disapprove). On terrorism and homeland security, however, Bush enjoys a comfortable margin of support. Fifty-seven percent of Americans say they approve of his work on these two issues while only about one-third (35 percent) disapprove.

Then there's the filibuster issue. The Republicans, in control of both legislative and executive branches, may push to change Senate rules to make it impossible to filibuster judicial nominees, the so-called "the nuclear option" because Democrats have threatened to respond by using procedural rules to shut the Senate down. (Under current Senate rules, 60 of the 100 senators are needed to cut off debate, and the Democrats have 45. That has been enough to sustain a filibuster, but not to win votes.) Neutering the filibuster would be unpopular with Americans, nearly six in ten (57 percent) of whom would disapprove. Even one-third (33 percent) of Republicans say they would object to such a move.

Still, as unfavorably as they view taking away the filibuster option, Americans may not have the stomach for an obstructionist Democratic response. Nearly half (46 percent) say they would disapprove of retaliatory slowing down or stopping of Senate business; 40 percent say they would approve of such a move. Political independents disapprove by a 47 percent-36 percent margin; just 26 percent of self-identified Democrats would disapprove.

Princeton Survey Research Associates conducted the Newsweek poll, interviewing 1,010 adults aged 18 and older on March 17 and March 18 by telephone. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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